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GRAVITY

By Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

What makes the world go round?

Our rabbis say: “*Al shloscha devarim haolam omeid.*” The world “stands” on three things: the Torah, the service of God and loving-kindness. *Al hatorah, v’al haavodah, v’al gemilut chasadim*, we sing. The Hebrew word here for “stand” is “omeid.” The image is one of the world balancing on our shoulders, or rather, on our service and loving-kindness.

But a lot of us might argue: “The world doesn’t stand on me! I stand on it!” And of all the possible human qualities of character, we might ask, why pick kindness? Why not justice or any of a hundred other things? And some of us might also be thinking (to ourselves): What’s the big deal about kindness, anyway? Everyone knows that nice guys, and gals, finish last.

We give it lip service, of course. We tell our children: Blah, blah, blah, be nice! Blah, blah, blah, don’t fight! But, if we had to pick one particular thing on which our children’s futures depended, it probably would not be kindness. Getting a good education and a stable job, gaining a foothold in the world are more likely to be at the top of the list. So, maybe kindness is overrated?

Our rabbis answer us: Where there is no kindness, there can *be* no stability. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains, the word “omeid” literally means “stands.” And, “that on which something ‘stands’ constitutes its foundation; if it loses that, it will fall.”

It reminds me of that movie Gravity, you know the one, where two astronauts (played by Sandra Bullock and George Clooney) are “stranded in space after the destruction of their space shuttle by a Russian missile strike on a defunct satellite, which has inadvertently caused a chain reaction forming a cloud of debris in space,” according to Wiki. The two astronauts try to make their way “on foot,” so to speak, to a space station. They’re constantly falling head over heels through space.

The movie got panned. The reviewers said: great special effects, lousy plot. At first I agreed with them. But I had to wonder. What’s so “special” about these effects? And why do we like them so much? Why go to

a place (even in our heads) where there’s nothing human, nothing to breathe, where even gravity is in short supply?

Maybe it’s because of what’s *not* there. Maybe it’s because, as Robert Frost put it, we’d “like to get away from earth awhile and then come back to it and begin over.” Maybe we crave space. If you’ve ever been to the desert, you know the feeling. In such a place, we’re thrown back on ourselves. We’re forced to focus. These are also the conditions of space, of course. Unlike the desert, though, there’s nothing to stand on.

In such a place of nothingness, what is it that keeps us from falling? Gravity is often described, as per Albert Einstein, as the “bending” of space and time in the presence of a mass. Or as the University of California at Riverside website puts it: “When we pass through time, the distortion of space-time by the presence of the earth accelerates our bodies towards the centre of the earth. When our feet touch the ground, it exerts a force on our feet in an upwards direction which pushes us up in the opposite direction.” It keeps us from falling. I understand just enough of all that to feel confident in putting my feet on the floor when I get out of bed in the morning.

My question is: Is there a *moral* equivalent? Is there something which draws us toward our own moral center and keeps us from falling? Is there such a thing as moral gravity? For example, if there is no stability without kindness, could we then compare kindness to gravity? Can kindness “bend” human internal time and space? And if so, what would it look like?

The short answer is: It looks like Avram. It doesn’t look like Sodom.

As Rabbi Hirsch tells us, the downfall of Sodom, and Avram sitting before his tent, are placed in one picture in our minds. The bad example and the good example are placed next to each other. What we know to be humane may be reinforced by looking at its opposite.

But perhaps we think we already know about the bad example, the crime of Sodom. Do we? It may not be what we think. What exactly happened in Sodom?

The scripture tells us that Lot, the nephew of Avram, was sitting in the gates of the city when a couple of strangers arrived. Now, if you knew your way around Sodom, as Lot did, you would know that they would find no hospitality there. Aware that they would have to spend the night in the street, Lot talks them into coming home with him. Reluctantly, they agree.

But then, just as they're settling in for the night, an angry mob of Lot's neighbors suddenly shows up. In a blind rage, they surround the house, banging on the walls and demanding that Lot send out his guests. If we know the story, we know what the neighbors have in mind to do with them. They have in mind to rape them. When he does not cooperate, they threaten to harm Lot himself.

But we have to ask: Why are they so angry? What did Lot or his guests ever do to them?

Rabbi Hirsch answers our question. This "was not just a rabble of curious people, these were '*anshei ha'ir*', the townspeople, and moreover '*anshei s'dom*', citizens, representatives of the state, who came to oppose this unheard-of attack on the old established laws, customs and privileges of their town." But what old established laws are we talking about?

The evil of Sodom, our rabbis say, lay in its failure to show kindness to strangers. And the measure of that evil lay in the fact that the city had actually made it a crime to provide hospitality to strangers. Why would they do that, you might wonder? Presumably, the inhabitants didn't like the idea of having to share the goods of their luxuriant city with others. In violating their law, Lot had revealed himself to be at odds with their interests.

It's interesting to note here that the word *humane* is derived from the word *human*. Their sin at its core lay in their not recognizing their visitors as *human beings* and treating them accordingly. In their failure to do that, the residents of Sodom revealed their inhumanity.

The failure to treat strangers with kindness is a source of great evil, say our rabbis. As Rabbi Hirsch explains, our enslavement and oppression at the hands of the Egyptians had its root in their first treating us as strangers. In no less than 36 (some say 46) places does the Torah warn us about this sin. We are reminded time and time again of the risk inherent in failing to treat strangers as human beings. The danger is that we may then feel that we can do as we like with them. They become objects to us, or worse yet, obstacles.

Lot had dared to flaunt these laws and *that* is what infuriated his neighbors. For this, he and his guests were to be punished. An example had to be made of him and his visitors to make sure it never happened again.

And just in case you're thinking this bad example has nothing to do with us in our own time, think again. Sodom is not unlike those modern communities who give bus tickets or plane fare to the homeless to get them out of town (and as far away as possible) in order to avoid spending precious local resources on them—

see the *New York Times* (June 3, 2016) article entitled: "Aloha and Welcome to Paradise. Unless You're Homeless."

That's the bad example.

And the good? That we find in Avram. The scripture says: "Then God appeared to him in the groves of Mamre and he was sitting at the door of his tent in the heat of the day." It was three days from the time of Avram's circumcision (the time when, our rabbis say, the wound would be the most painful) and it was hot. And yet, he sat in the door of his tent on the lookout for weary wanderers. And sure enough, just as Avram was communing with God, three strangers appeared.

It's interesting that Avram does not wait for them to find him. And he does not delay in prayer. He is really looking for an "opportunity" to practice kindness. He sees kindness to strangers as an opportunity, not a burden. And when three guys (who turn out to be three angels) show up, he invites them to dinner. He literally runs, leaving his prayer, his communion with God, to show hospitality to them.

Now, this may not seem like much to us. And yet, for this seemingly small act of kindness, Avram is characterized by our sages as *amud hachesed*, a "pillar of kindness," meaning that he is one of the ones, referred to by Simon The Just, on whom the world stands, as noted above.

A pillar, of course, is something or, in this case, someone, who holds up something else. But what exactly is he holding up? Perhaps the answer seems obvious: the physical survival of those whom he fed and sheltered. And yet how could that alone hold up the world? Even if it did, it wouldn't do so for long. With Avram's passing, this "holding up" would come to an end.

It has to be something bigger than Avram, something that could potentially affect the whole world, something that, like gravity, could "bend" space and time. But do we really even think that's possible?

Most of us act as if it's not. The effect, we would say, is way out of proportion to the deed. So, he invited some people to dinner. That's nice, but it's not exactly earth-shaking. We see only the smallness of the deed. Perhaps that's because we don't see the consequences. Or maybe it's because if we ourselves are going to do a kindness, we want it to be something big. Unfortunately, doing something big often has us waiting for a big opportunity. And in the meantime, we ignore all the smaller opportunities that land right on our doorstep.

It's ironic, because most of us know the value for ourselves of being treated kindly, in big *or* small ways, and we certainly expect others to treat us that way. And yet we often underestimate its value in the lives of others. We don't believe what our rabbis say: One good or bad deed draws another in its train.

For example, we ourselves don't like being cut off in traffic, but we don't calculate the effect of cutting someone else off. We don't see the anger of the person who's been cut off (who's already driven away) and the

effect of their anger (road rage) on others. We don't see that to prove that he or she is not a person to be cut off, he or she cuts someone else off. And then, perhaps, an accident ensues, resulting in injury or death. But we don't see it. And so, for us at least, it doesn't count.

One small act of kindness can interrupt this chain of events. Someone who recognizes the image of God at our core, who treats us humanely, can remind us that we are human beings, not objects. And, conversely, when we recognize the image of God in another person and treat them humanely, we begin to believe the same of ourselves.

This is Avram's gift to the three guys who visited him. It is also his gift to us. If we recognize our humanity, we may act like Avram and we may have the privilege of causing others to recognize it in themselves.

At our core we have a spark of the divine—our moral free will. We have the capacity to live large in the image of God. But not unlike the inhabitants of Sodom, we sometimes lose sight of that. We fail to recognize that we and they contain the image of God. To be humane is to recognize the human in ourselves *and* in the person standing before us.

When we do this, the space between us and God shrinks. And so does the space between us and other humans. Even time shrinks in this equation. After all, we remember the act of Avram, who, thousands of years ago, performed an act of kindness.

This is *our* gravity. To be a “pillar of kindness,” to show loving-kindness and to remind others of their own capacity for loving-kindness.

And, it is possible to perform such kindness even in a place of little or no gravity. Remember the last scene in the movie? We find Stone (played by Bullock) having returned to earth, struggling to adjust to earth's gravity once again. But what is it that got her there? Was there something in particular to which we could point that made that possible?

To answer this question, we must rewind to that moment in which the two astronauts, running out of air and maneuvering power, try to grab onto the International Space Station, as they fly by it. In the attempt, Stone's leg becomes caught in the parachute cords of a deployed Soyuz (Soviet spacecraft). She then grabs onto a strap on Kowalski's suit. But it quickly becomes clear that the cords are not strong enough to support them both. If they remain together, they will both die. In order to save her, Kowalski, over her protestations, detaches himself from the tether. She is pulled back toward the Space Station while he floats away.

Ironically, he fills a gap by creating one, which, at

that moment, cannot be filled by anything or anyone else. Our rabbis say, in a place where there is no true human, be that human. Be humane. Be a pillar of kindness. It's such a small gesture, undoing a tether. But it's *always* like that. Some little, unannounced, seemingly inconsequential deed is the one that saves us.

I leave you with this poem. It's called:

All Things Are Made of Smaller Things

What does it take
To bring about
The kingdom of God on earth?
We search
And never know
The kingdom's end.
We strain
To find an order in the skies,
To find our place
And count our part.
The moon, the stars—
Which are we?
Dust.
Small stones
Skipped into a summer sea.
And yet,
The largest things
Are made of smaller things.
Drops divide the waters of the sea,
And drops divide those drops.
And sands of moons
And distant stars
Are also small.
And none is lost.
And so
Are all small acts
Of kindness
Like drops of water
That can wear away a stone
To its very heart,
Or make a well
Spring up,
Or wash away
A shadow on a soul
And help to bring it
In the light.
Which are we?
And where?
A little lower
Than the angels.

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